

Correspondence

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Comment on: Randomized controlled trial of plain English and visual abstracts for disseminating surgical research via social media

Editor

We read with interest the article by Chapman *et al.*¹ regarding the use of visual abstracts to make surgical research more accessible to the public via social media.

We agree that social media represents an excellent opportunity to engage the public in research. Visual abstracts provide easy access to research but cannot substitute for reading the original paper. To view abstracts composed of pictures is easier than reading the text, which could explain why greater engagement is seen with visual abstracts. However, visual abstracts may simplify a study with the risk of sacrificing important detail within the explanation. This could lead to erroneous conclusions and potentially exchanging a smaller, well-informed audience for a larger, less accurately informed one.

Care must be taken when ‘engagement’ is measured to avoid bias. Using the authors’ metrics, ‘engagement’ may purely demonstrate a response to a visual stimulus. As described by Harp *et al.*², the use of pictures may reflect an interest in the images rather than intellectual understanding of the science. If we are aiming to engage readers with the intent of usefully informing them, further investigation should aim to assess whether engagement goes beyond this superficial interaction.

H. Pringle^{ORCID}, M. Bennett, G. Fowler^{ORCID}
and R. M. Bethune
*Department of Colorectal Surgery, Royal
Devon and Exeter Hospital, Exeter, UK*

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- 1 Chapman SJ, Grossman RC, FitzPatrick MEB, Brady RWW. Randomized controlled trial of plain

English and visual abstracts for disseminating surgical research via social media. *Br J Surg* 2019; **106**: 1611–1616.

- 2 Harp SF, Mayer RE. The role of interest in learning from scientific text and illustrations: On the distinction between emotional interest and cognitive interest. *J Educ Psychol* 1997; **89**: 92–102.